

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THE MAN WHO WAS ALONE

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By Hugh Pendexter



At first he did not know what had awakened him. Then as the ragged filament of a dream of home was fully washed from his mind he stared at the open window in amazement. He had been aroused by the silence. His watch had stopped, but the sun, to his further surprise, had passed the meridian; yet no rumbling rush of the Second Avenue Elevated reached him. His first tangible thought was that the lull was an abnormal incident in the city's life. But it lasted! It endured. Even when he leaned from his window he could hear nothing. And he was within a block of Broadway!

Hurriedly dressing and disturbed by an emotion he could not analyze he descended to the street and walked to Broadway. He could see no moving life, not even after turning into the main thoroughfare. No stores were open, no cars or vehicles were moving. Nothing but a mighty silence, the like of which he had never conceived of before. It was the absolute quiet of eternal space, unruffled by breeze or bird. The very sunlight felt dead. Bewildered, yet not fully able to appreciate this prototype of death, he turned his course toward Madison Square. He paused in front of the St. James Building to examine an empty cab. His rural training at once led him to observe that the traces had been cut. But why? And where were the driver and the horse?

Hastening on he found the square as silent as the street. A new source of wonder was found in the patches of tall grass and several mildewed newspapers, bearing the date of yesterday. He gazed stupidly at the grass and then stumbled to the small building in the center of the square and slumped down on the steps. He would wait until some one passed that way. Two hours went by and he was as much alone as ever. No sound, no moving object; nothing but stiff buildings, that reminded him of sentinels in a cemetery.

At last he remembered he had eaten nothing that day, and as one in a trance he made his way to the nearest hostelry. It was silent and through the open doors looked empty. He entered the cafe and curiously contemplated some silver coins on the bar beside an overturned glass. Now more timidly, as he slowly became aware he was wandering alone in the midst of some awful metamorphosis, he tip-toed through room after room on the ground floor. On every side and at his feet was disorder, as if the guests had departed in great haste. Clothing and hand-baggage were scattered thickly about, while tables were cluttered with remnants of interrupted feasting. He rubbed his head with both hands and threw away his hat. Then, wild-eyed, stretched his arms to the silent walls and cried, "God!"

The sound of his own voice had a peculiarly terrifying effect. It not only echoed and re-echoed throughout the building, but it seemed to find the open, and sweep in a strained whisper through every street and alley. He must not speak aloud again, he told himself, and he pressed his hand against his side to still the dull thud, thud of his pumping heart.

But what did he fear? What was the danger his inner self told him to dread and avoid? It could not be a physical presence, as he had no inclination to appropriate a loaded revolver at his feet. Yet there was something; something that had caused luxury and poverty, youth and age, and even the riotous and drunken, to flee the place. Then a faint hope stirred him; perhaps it was only local, and down-town there was companionship. There was no smoke or noise to support this suggestion, however.

But the shadows of the deserted hotel oppressed him, and rushing soft-footed to the buffet he picked up a loaf of bread and some cheese and a bottle of beer and hurried to the street. In a dull way he was surprised to find the bread so dry and the beer so warm and flat; yet he ate a little as he moved south.

Down-town was his objective point, but he could not bring himself to save any distances by leaving the shelter of the buildings. Now he was obsessed by the fear that he was being watched. He could not decide from what point of espial unseen eyes were following him; from any of the innumerable windows it might be. So strongly did the unwholesome dread seize upon him that he crouched in a deep doorway to be out of the range of all those sinister orbs, while he finished his bread and cheese. The beer-bottle he was about to throw away, but grew fearful of the tinkling of the broken glass, and left it carefully in the doorway.

Once, just beyond the hotel, when he thought he heard the sound of stealthy footsteps, he paused mid-way in the street and peered anxiously about him. Only half-convinced that it was but the echo of his own steps he resumed his flight, moving more softly. In passing the east entrance of the Flatiron Building his eyes distended at beholding several spider-webs blocking the doorway. It was incredible, terrifying, and his soul shivered.

Where were the crowds? The dull, the intent, the listless, the hopeless and the ambitious faced people; where were they? Sympathy? What recked that now. Companionship! Companionship of his fellow-men, of a dog, of anything, was what he hungered for. Simply the companionship of a passing presence.

The glare of the countless windows had by this time become intolerable. His last glimpse of the Metropolitan building decided him on a new course. He would take the Subway. With this thought came a hope and he thrilled with high expectation. The people, of course, fearing some calamity, had taken refuge underground. This was the explanation. Else how could an entire city empty itself in a single night so completely as to leave not a single individual behind? But the horses? Where were the horses? Bus and dray, private equipage and cross-town horse car stood abandoned all along his way. But the horses, like the drivers, had vanished. Then he remembered the spider-webs and wondered if they could have been spun in a single night.

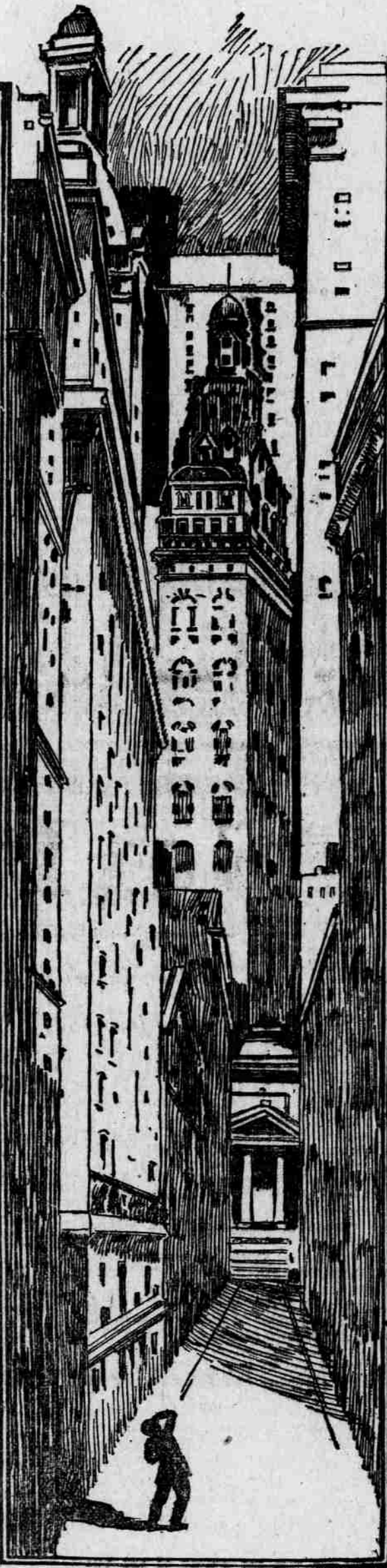
He was still debating these two points when he reached a Subway entrance near Union Square. As he clattered down the steps he mechanically produced a coin and shoved it in the small window. But no lightning hand brushed it from his sight, no ticket-chopper waited expectant—the Subway was as deserted and quiet as the up-stairs world. A down-town express stood empty beside a local, and a wall of blackness forbade his passing beyond the rim of murky light filtering down the stairway.

He crept back, his distorted face reflecting the torture of his soul. Outside he crouched against a building and gnawed his fingers. Should he go north or south? Then the picture of the empty square, surrounded by leering, staring windows, also the stealthy footsteps behind him, decided him to risk the unknown and try for Brooklyn.

He was dimly conscious of being uncomfortable from the heat, and without bothering to remove his pocket-book he threw away his coat. The sun on his bare head made him feel faint at times, and this terrified him anew. He must keep up till he reached the bridge. For now, he reasoned, the people had crossed into Brooklyn. But what about the webs on the Flatiron?

Then he paused as an inspiration came to him. Why had he forgotten the newspaper offices? Had he turned north to Herald Square and the Times Building he would have ascertained by this time what had eliminated the life of the great city.

"Newspaper Row," he mumbled; and then afraid of open speech he sought to condone the eternal silence by repeating the words in a whisper.



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Panting amid hope and dread he stole into the small park and paused a bit from the curb to read the bulletins. He had intended to enter the buildings, but his courage failed him. Eagerly he scanned some tall letters directly before him.

WHAT MONSTER HAVE THE PEOPLE CRE—

He rubbed his eyes in uncomprehending horror. What could it mean? Had he alone been left behind by a mighty exodus, or was he the sole survivor of an awful annihilation? He threw himself on a bench and madly endeavored to arrest his whirling, chaotic thoughts—to find a mental starting point from which he could theorize with coherency. The situation was inconceivable, he kept assuring himself, as his distracted mind rioted in a nightmare of conjecture.

He began in a dim way to conquer his intangible fears and resolutely applied himself to finding some addendum to the abandoned query so fixedly staring

at him from boards. This incomplete bulletin was the most poignant note in the whole discord of silence. The very letters, with their pallidly white background, kept repeating the question with hideous intensity as he crawled about, forcing himself to examine each bit of paper that lay dead before the yawning doors. As he persisted the tumult of his nearly destroyed faculties quieted and the insane rushing hither and thither of his thoughts no longer seemed to fill the entire city with their clamor.

For several minutes he sought in the remnants of the newspapers for some clue to the cause of his astounding isolation; but he could find nothing that gave him any help except as the perusal of their columns strengthened him in self-control. Then he came upon a bit of "copy", blown from some window, or else dropped by some newswriter in his flight from the building. Like the bulletin it reflected dazed incredulity, the groping of an astounded mind attempting to grapple with the incomprehensible. It began: "Are we to believe that the millions of hurrying, toiling, despondent, triumphant lives—actuated by an all-encompassing, all-pervading spirit of selfishness—have engendered some awful physical force, or personality, in the very mountains of steel and stone they have created, and does this Thing feed upon that which created it?"

In the next few pages the writer wallowed in a sea of words, evidently writing in a frenzied search for some expression that would convey intelligence; but finally, in despair at finding an adequate vocabulary, he had crossed them out. Near the end the copy was more intelligible, yet did not presume to state a fact. Instead, it asked, "Are there undreamed of forces in the atmosphere enveloping the city? Have the passionate endeavors for self-preservation, for gain, for lustful triumphs—exhaled for years—at last produced a concrete result? And has the final total solidified into a physical, tangible Thing, the like of which never before existed? Why not? Whence came the first awful forms of life that overran the world in the beginning?"

All this gave no answer to the staring bulletin, but it allowed the reader to sanely pursue a useless endeavor to hit upon a solution. Whatever had caused New York to become a solitude it was something entirely undreamed of before in the history of the world. It was not a pestilence, it was not a physical menace that could be met by man's cunning resistance—it was something infinite in potentiality; something that a great people had fled before, or had been eliminated by, in a single night. Then he remembered the mildewed papers in Madison Square and wondered if he had not slept longer than a night.

On another piece of "copy" he found scrawled. "More in heaven and earth than ever dreamed of in thy philosophy—"

And again, in some reporter's story of the first appearance of the phenomenon, or Thing—written doubtfully—he read in part, as follows: "The report of a wraith-like, vaporous shape that extirpates all forms of life it passes over, has been so persistently telephoned into the various precinct stations that it can no longer be ignored and a quiet investigation is now on foot. It is said that whole families have disappeared from the crowded foreign quarters; while many reports have been made of strange disappearances from the hotel and office sections. It is also rumored that in several theatres only a small per cent. of the patrons came forth yesterday and that the greater portion of the audiences simply melted away as if they had never been. This is so preposterous that it could not be written if it were not for the mysterious disappearance last night of twenty theatre managers, who gathered in a Sixth Avenue café for the purpose of a secret conference, and who never came out. Nor have they been seen by their friends or families.

"While speculation is flying from one ridiculous extreme to another the fact remains the people are silently apprehensive of something they cannot name, and are leaving the city by thousands, hourly."

This was probably, one of the first intimations in print, he decided, of the strange visitation. Besides this he read but two other items, both telegraphic bulletins, dated from Washington. The first said: "Professor Muehlanrk announced he has discovered that a new force exists in certain atmospheric belts, where huge numbers of people are gathered within a small radius, which, under certain conditions, is instantaneously fatal to all forms of life, and even

absorbing, or eradicating, the physical frame itself."

The other, dated later in the same day from the same city, announced: "Professor Muehlanrk was arrested while trying to force his way into the White House this afternoon. He will be examined as to his sanity. His errand was to inform the President of an astounding discovery, he said."

This was all that Newspaper Row had to offer. From it he deduced that the annihilating force attacked congested centers first. What it consisted of he could not conceive, unless Professor Muehlanrk had hinted at the truth. Whether other cities had been devastated he had no idea. But the instinct of self-preservation allowed him to see but one path—to make Brooklyn and seek the open country beyond.

His gait was now accelerated by the gathering gloom. Night was slipping upon him; and regardless of the clattering echoes he rushed with distracted speed for the bridge entrance. As he tumbled down some steps the gloom increased and became thick; and he sank against the cool rock in despair. Even while he was hesitating and dumbly essaying to summon up the courage of despair the tumultuous throbbing of his heart stopped at the soft pit-pat of approaching footsteps. The steps were coming to him from out the darkness, and with lolling tongue that sought to sound one wild shriek he turned and staggered up the steps and into a new world.

For in place of the gloom a myriad of lights twinkled on every side. The city was illuminated. Now surely the people had returned; and yet the streets were empty. Still fearing he might hear the soft pit-pat behind him he ran for nearly a mile through the lighted street before exhaustion brought him to a halt. He looked back, expecting he knew not what. He could not conceive of the Thing's shape or size, but once the narrowing lines of lights encompassed any moving thing he believed reason would desert him and that he would fall an easy prey, or else unwittingly escape to wander aimlessly about, a babbling automaton.

He sought to divert his mind from this fancy by turning his eyes to the building across the way. The lower floor had been occupied by a leather dealer and the skins and hides took an fantastic shape as he gazed. The office was brilliantly lighted and it seemed as if some bit of life must pass within his ken. Then he feared it might, and with one glance over his shoulder he resumed his flight. What agency had turned on the lights? Had he waited at the bridge entrance would his eyes have beheld the Thing that walked softly, like a woman?

He was now approaching a tall structure which he could not remember having seen before; a structure exceeding in height any other in all New York, he told himself. And even in his soul-terror he paused in awe and craned his neck to count the innumerable lines of lighted windows that in ever diminishing streaks of white led up to the vast dome, where glowed a huge ball of green fire.

"God!" he shrieked, falling prostrate. "The home of the Thing! The home of the Thing! It's growing."

For the ball of fire seemed to ascend higher and higher as he stared, as if the building were elongating and pushing it up.

"Give me back my people," he cried, stretching out his hands to the evil pile. "Yes, my people. Give them back. Give back the good and the bad! Yes, yes! Give me back the selfish! The evil! Where are they all?"

As if in answer there came a mighty clanking and the huge double doors of the structure slowly began to open.

"You'll be all right in a minute," declared the policeman. "No bones broken. Just bumped."

"You're all here! You've come back!" gasped the injured man, opening his eyes and staring at the circle of faces. "You've come back; the good and the bad. All come back!"

"Take a brace, old man, and don't go dippy. Youse ain't hurt none," assured the policeman, kindly, as he helped him to his feet.

"Sympathy! sympathy!" cried the injured man in an exultant voice. "Ah, it all sounds good. I—I guess I'm all right now. No, no. I don't want the number of the car. It's all right. It don't matter. But how long was I unconscious?"

"Less'n a half minute," informed the policeman.